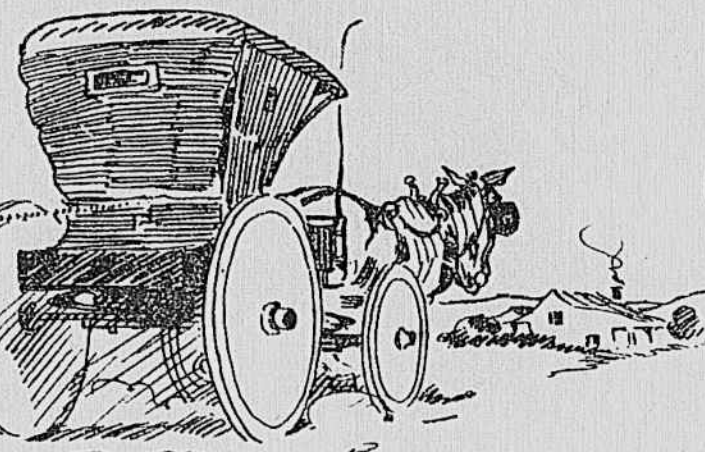
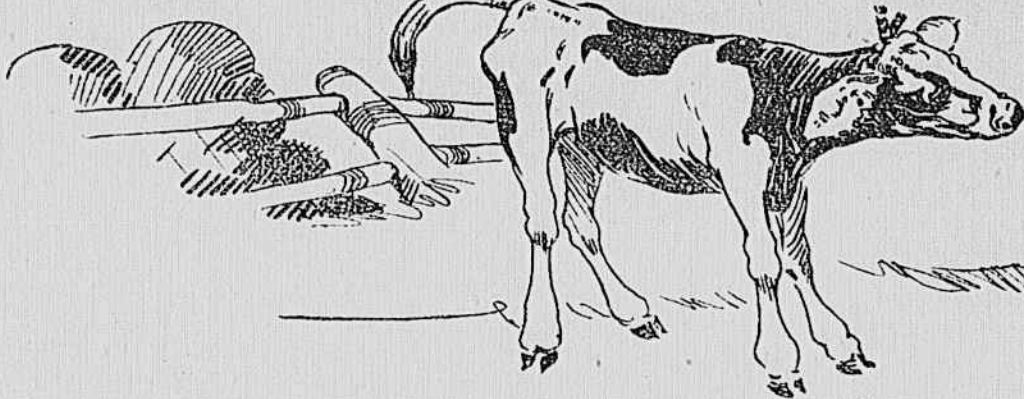


REAL ROMANCES OF THE BUSINESS WORLD

Graft and the Road Roller



BY RICHARD SPILLANE.

Arnold, who used to sell road rollers, has reformed. He had to. He says if this country ever has good roads it will be owing to a large degree to the number of road rollers he has distributed over the land. There still is a good demand for road rollers, steam or gasoline, but that does not interest him. He is tired of the game, tired of dealing with grafters, tired, too, perhaps of the ever present risk of exposure and, possibly, of going to jail. You would not think there was much graft in the road roller, but there is. Arnold, who has sold more of the cumbersome, ponderous machines perhaps than any two men in America, says he never saw a business more graft-ridden. He should know, for in the twenty-five years he has been a commercial traveler he has sold all sorts of things, from fountain pens by the hundred gross to locomotives by the dozen.

"Bah!" said he to a party of friends who were dining with him at the Sales Managers' Club. "Don't tell me they are getting craft out of politics. All the road rollers I sold were to politicians, and I never sold a machine that I did not have to give up in one form or another. Exciting? Yes. Dangerous? You bet, unless you are clever and know how to handle people. I liked immensely for a few years, but after that I got disgusted. Maybe it was a sort of moral awakening or moral revulsion. At any rate, I was mighty glad to get out of the business, although I made big money in it. You have no idea the money there is in road rollers. They cost about \$1,400 to make, and they sell for what you can get anywhere from \$2,700 to \$4,000."

600, f. o. b. factory. Usually you sell only one or two at a time, but there was one sale of twenty and sales of three, four, five or six are not uncommon. I made \$10,000 to \$12,000 a year, but I never felt quite right.

"I had lots of adventures, lots of thrills, lots of narrow escapes, and I doubt if anybody as the road roller to match my experiences. Once to get an order I had to bribe a clerkman by giving him a call. Ever hear of such a thing? Once I had to do business in a county where everybody holding office seemed to have his hand out. Why, there even was a woman there who was in the game with the rest of the grafters."

"I had been on the road for weeks and had returned to the Chicago headquarters when the boss showed me a telegram from a Louisiana city notifying us that the county commissioners (they call them police jurors down there) were going to award a contract for a road roller two days later. There was nothing for me to do but jump, so I left on that night's train."

"I had provided myself with a few letters of introduction, and when I got into Louisiana shortly before noon on the contract day, I made straight for one of the men I had a letter to. He was a former sheriff of the parish (they call the counties parishes in Louisiana), and was running a saloon. He remarked that I was pretty late getting on the job. I acknowledged that was true, but said I hoped by his aid to get busy right away. "Well," said he, "let us first have a bottle of wine. I'll serve to shared our wits."

"I told him I would be delighted, but I must insist upon doing the buying, for much as I appreciated his good-

fellowship and hospitality, it was my right and privilege to do the spending, especially as I had a big fat expense account."

"You always can get them on that expense account talk. Well, we agreed a bottle and as we paid attention to it I said to him, 'Tomkins, you know the game here and I don't. I'm a stranger, you're an old-timer. Whom have I got to see to get this contract? Understand, I've got to have it.'"

"He took a sip of his champagne and then he said, 'How far are you willing to go to get it?' 'Two-fifty,' I answered. He thought a few moments and then said he thought that ought to do. "But," he added, "you have no time to spare. The police jurors meet at 2:30 P. M. Better get a move on."

"All right," I told him, "if you'll handle the money I'll get busy. I never deal direct with officials. It is not safe. I always work it through a third party. It is best for all concerned. What do you say?"

"You're a wise boy, and I'm with you, Tomkins told me. 'Now,' I said, 'who's the man to get next to among these commissioners or jurors?' Tomkins suggested that he telephone him to come to the saloon."

"Those county towns are not big, and it was less than a minute before the police jurors and I were shaking hands and I was inviting him to drink with us. I asked Tomkins to call some more of his friends in, for I wanted to spend enough to make Tomkins happy and at the same time dodge drinking much myself. So soon as I could decently do so I suggested to Peters that I would like to take a look at the town. Peters and I excused ourselves and started out. We didn't go far before I told Peters I didn't care to view the town from the main street. I'd prefer to see how it looked up an alley. He smiled. We went into an alley and I put it right straight to him. He nodded and handed a bit of money to a waiter. He said one of my competitors was willing to give that amount."

"I was considering the wisdom of raising the ante when it occurred to me that here being so much delay and sometimes there being a slip in the passing of money, it would be a good idea to let Peters know there was no chance to lose if I got the contract. So I told him Tomkins would guarantee anything I promised and would handle the money."

"Well, if that's the case," said Peters, "it's all right."

"By this time we had approached the rear of a three or four-story ramshackle hotel. See that hotel," said Peters, pointing to the hotel, "the lovely back view. 'Ain't it a dandy? I own that! And then he took me by the arm and whispered: 'And I made every dollar it cost me by graft.' Talk about pride! The man Peters was as proud of his success as a grafter as a peacock is of his tail. He assured me he would see I got the contract, but not to make my bid so high as to provoke comment. By the way," he asked, "what are you going to bid?" "I was thinking about \$3,250," I replied. "That's what Jackland is bidding," he rejoined. "We were going to give it to him, but now that you have turned up I'll have the boys switch on the deal."

"He advised me to hurry. It is noon and you haven't your bid prepared," he said. "Do you know you have to have a certified check for \$100 accompany it? Here is one of the blanks for a bid. Fill it out. Here's a fountain pen. Now, how about the certified check? I told him that was easy, as I always carried a roll. I went to a bank and got a certified check for \$100. Then I proceeded to the county courthouse. When I entered the county clerk's office a pretty girl came forward and said she was county clerk. I've been told once or twice that I'm a good looking fellow, and there are some people who think I am rather enterprising when I try to be. It may have been the champagne or it may have been the surprise of finding a pretty girl in such an office, but at any rate I made myself so agreeable after I had presented my bid that the young woman invited me to be seated."

"We chatted a while and discovered we had some mutual acquaintances. That cemented our good feeling. Next the girl expressed the hope that I would get the contract. 'Would it help you if you knew what the other bids are?' she inquired after a while. 'Certainly,' would I answer. 'But they are sealed.' She laughed and said the police jurors always got sealed proposals and always secretly examined the bids before formally opening them, so there could be no juggling by the men they had dealings with. But now can they open a sealed bid without the envelope showing evidence of it? I asked. 'I'll show you,' she answered, and she took my envelope and with a very thin and sharp knife cut through the lower flap delicately and carefully at the bottom. When the cutting was finished she drew out the bid. 'See,' she said, 'how easy it is? Now I'll put it back and by running a little machine along the edge of the envelope this way, I'll reseal it so no one except a person making a search for just this sort of thing could suspect there had been any tampering. It was a new one on me. I've heard since that is the way the government officials open suspected letters."

Before I left the county clerk's office I knew one of my competitors had bid \$2,500, one \$3,250 and the other two \$4,250. So I was safe. So feeling I invited the young woman to lunch with me. She accepted, and from what she told me and from what Peters had indicated in his reference to his graft hotel, I don't believe there was a honest bid of competitive bidding in that parish in ten years. Graft, graft, those pirates grafted on everything. I suppose I shouldn't kick. I got my contract that evening after we all had explained our machines and answered the questions of the various police jurors and I got an order

for another roller to be delivered later on at the same price, but it bothered me to think of that nice girl mixed up with those grafters."

"The affair with the clerkman happened in Illinois. I had been out twenty-four days and had spent twenty-two of those twenty-four nights in a sleeper when I got a message to hurry to a country town in Northern Illinois. I did not relish the trip much, but

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when I arrived at the hotel I became interested. Half a dozen of my competitors were in the lobby, and as I was signing the register they crowded around and asked questions.

"You here, too, on that road roller contract?" asked the hotel clerk.

"Yes," I replied.

"But you're too late, old boy," said the salesman for a Pittsburgh house. The award is to be made in a few hours."

"I'll bet a hat this gentleman gets the contract," said the hotel clerk.

"I'll go you," replied the salesman.

"Well," I exclaimed, "this thing is taking on such a sporty look I'd better get busy or my friend, the clerk, will be in the hole." We all laughed, and then, on the quiet, some of the boys told me everything that had been said. There were three county commissioners. One was a clerkman. He was chairman. The boys, of course, wouldn't approach him. They had agreed, as they do occasionally, to prevent costly competition, that one of the number should get this contract. It was his turn. I never was in the combination. Of the other two commissioners one had been bribed. He was a strong character and dominated the other commissioners, who were a milk-and-water sort of creatures.

"With the situation confronting me there only was one thing to do first. That was to get the commissioners to postpone action. It was Saturday. When the commissioners met I went before them and explained that my company had not received advice of the competition until a late day; that I had hurried to the city; that I wished to put in a bid; that there was nothing for the county to lose and possibly much to gain by postponing action until Monday, etc."

"The man who had been bribed said he was opposed to delay. It was my fault if I did not get there earlier. The commissioners had studied the subject fully and he moved the contract be awarded."

"I argued some more and so did the others opposed to me, and it was late in the afternoon when at last the commissioners agreed to let the bids go over until Monday."

"I had studied the clerkman while I was talking. He was one of those dull, stolid Germans, slow of speech and action. I knew if I was to win that board's approval I must win him."

"There were two exits to the courthouse, one, the main one, in front, and one on the side. When the commissioners and I were departing I was on the lookout, and as the clerkman started toward the side door I followed him. You know the salesman thinks he is justified in doing anything to land an order, so I went up to the reverend gentleman and told him I wanted him to do me a great favor; I was a great home body and I depended being on the road. Nothing was more trying to me than to be about a strange hotel in a strange town on Sunday. I loved the country, and I asked if he would permit me to go to his home, spend the Sabbath with him, attend service, listen to his sermon and eat the good, wholesome food his wife cooked."

"I spoke ardently, as I do when I'm doing my most earnest lying, and the old chap sort of warmed up. His buggy invited me to get in. As we rode away from town I set to work adroitly to find his weakness. I found it. His ambition was to have good cattle. He loved cattle. His church was poor or he was so dull a preacher that he never had prospered. His whole life had been one of struggle and striving. Then he told me of a high grade cat one of his neighbors had. The clerkman never had owned a blooded animal, and he thought that calf was one of the finest he ever had seen."

"It was nearing dusk, and we were not far from the clerkman's home, which was four miles from town, when the preacher pointed to a field near by and said: 'There's the calf now.' I looked and saw the animal. I know no more about Hereford heifers than I do of sacred ilians, but I began to express my admiration of the one. I asked the clerkman to stop the buggy. We got out and approached the calf. I declared it surely was a thoroughbred. The clerkman haltingly said he didn't think so. But I insisted the calf was thoroughbred, and I enthusiastically announced that I intended to buy the animal if I could get it for a reasonable price. The clerkman looked doubtful, but accompanied me to the farmer's house, and after a little dickering I got the calf for \$35. We hitched the calf behind the buggy and proceeded."

"It was nearing dark, and the clerkman's house I told him I would like him to care for the calf a few weeks anyhow."

He brightened at this, for in his simple soul he loved that calf. That night I lied artistically and persistently about the farm I had and the large number of blooded cattle I owned, and on next day I went to church three times and pretended to rejoice it."

"I'll bet a man of my habits, that Sunday night I told the preacher I had enjoyed his hospitality so much that I thought I should show my appreciation. I knew of no better way than to present the calf to him."

"When I said this the old man nearly wept. There were tears in his eyes I am sure and his voice was husky as he thanked me."

"The next morning as we were driving into town I talked cattle again. I told him I had a far better heifer on my farm than the one I gave to him; and then, five minutes or so later, I slipped myself on the knee and said:

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"By Jove, I'll do it!" The clerkman turned an inquiring look at me, and I explained the situation to him. "You love cattle," I said, "and you have only a few head. I love cattle, and have that I cannot see mine except at rare intervals. I was thinking when the bid of that thoroughbred heifer of mine would be to you, and then I suddenly made up my mind that if I got this contract to-day I'd celebrate by sending that other heifer to you."

"My clerical friend in his stolid, dull way, studied over this half a minute and then said I was too generous and I small courtesy."

"Well," I said, "if it gives pleasure to me that is all right. That heifer is yours if I am fortunate to-day."

"I didn't want to be seen riding in town with him. It might occasion comment later on. So when we were in I'd get out. He was altogether unsuspicious, altogether innocent and thought only a whim of the old man who had been his guest, so he let me alight."

"When he drove off I made my way by the commissioners were to meet in the morning, the one under the influence of the man bribed by my rivals, beginning with a little talk about the superiority of my road roller. I dropped a few hints about the amount of money he had boasted of the way he could make this one do anything he desired."

"When the commissioners met that morning we salesmen had ten minutes each to explain our machines. I talked straight to this disgruntled commissioner. Occasionally I dropped out of the fall of my eye at the clerkman. He was nodding approval of everything I said."

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"When he drove off I made my way by the commissioners were to meet in the morning, the one under the influence of the man bribed by my